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WASHINGTON - A small, one-of-a-kind U.S. spy plane is on its way to Afghanistan, where it will home in on drug labs and gather evidence against heroin kingpins.

The specially fitted King Air 350 twin-engine turboprop is the latest weapon in what has been a frustrating effort to stem the drug trade in Afghanistan. Opium from the nation's thriving poppy fields is used to produce 93 percent of the world's heroin, with much of the profit helping to fund the resurgent Taliban.

The silver sliver of a plane measures just 4 feet across the interior, with a retractable camera underneath to photograph drug activity. The plane also will capture voices on the ground that can be used in criminal prosecutions.

"This piece of equipment is going to help in building our cases, collecting evidence and, even more importantly, it will be a lifesaver," said Michael Braun, chief of operations for the Drug Enforcement Administration. He said the plane will alert ground forces to resistance they are likely to encounter when bursting into a drug lab.

"It will indicate threats that can materialize very, very quickly," added Braun, a former police officer in Cape Girardeau, Mo.

William Brown, head of DEA aviation, said the plane will "give us eyes on target, a high definition video system to see up close. It will bring a huge measure of safety to our efforts."

The plane, made by Northrop Grumman, took off Friday from a private hangar at Ronald Reagan National Airport outside Washington. Representatives from the DEA, State Department and other agencies were on hand, as was a Post-Dispatch reporter who had been invited to the event.

Also present was Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Ill., who secured \$9.2 million for the plane in the defense budget two years ago after consulting with the DEA and counternarcotics officials in Afghanistan.

U.S. officials hope that going after the relatively few Afghan drug kingpins will prove more effective than trying to eradicate the innumerable poppy fields.

Kirk said the plane will help capture evidence during and immediately after raids on drug labs.

"When they're hit, the first thing the drug lords do when they hear planes is to panic and get on their cell phones," Kirk said. "You want to scoop (those conversations) up. That's what this plane will do."